

Marantz PMD661

It is not uncommon now to encounter features on a portable solid state recorder that you wouldn't want to use even on your DAW. ZENON SCHOEPE discovers a recorder that actually does less than most.

We are steered by our likes, dislikes and plain old prejudices far more than we ever like to let on yet acknowledging this human condition is a step on the road to contentment. I have a deep dislike of small shiny electrical devices. I love a small mic and I'll marvel at the skill and engineering involved in creating a multipin fastening connector but anything that purports to be a 'machine' better be bigger than my hand. There is something undignified in overly miniaturised electronics; something toy-like and temporary, trivial and disposable. To my sensibilities there is nothing cool, swish or 'advanced technology' about shouting into a telephone the size of a fun size chocolate bar. Miniaturisation was useful to get men on the moon but now it aims only to impress consumers; we benefit from the circuits and the components but professional applications don't benefit from a miniaturised interface. To me there is a minimum size for a 'machine' and that is dictated by a practical and repeatable ability to hit a particular button or switch accurately in a variety of circumstances. This minimum size dictated is also driven by the requirement to give at least adequate visual feedback to the user.

Many of the solid state recorders currently on the market are simply too small for me. Unless you adopt some contorted ten-pin bowler-style handshake grip on the thing then your fingers will obscure the controls and the screen. And the sensitivity of these small devices to hand noise remains a problem when you place them on a surface as they still respond to every knock and creak. That really is the rub — these are meant to be portable recorders and while they are capable of high quality results using external input sources they are going to be used primarily with their in-built mics.

I have been using Marantz portables for all my recording of such things as interviews for more than a decade now. My first 'serious' cassette portable was a Marantz and when that became uneconomical to fix I moved very reluctantly to a PMD670. As it happened this was a perfect transition to digital for me as it was a large, chunky and dependable feeling machine with lots of switches and I-O. I've been using the PMD661 (UK£529 + VAT) since it came out; it is the best portable recorder I have ever used.

Let's start by telling you what it doesn't have. It doesn't have effects or EQ, the ability to dub a karaoke vocal over previously recorded programme, or some infuriatingly impossible yet comprehensive

means of editing. No, there are none of those daft things — this is a recorder that, err, records. If you want to edit then you can pull the stuff of the SD or SDHC card via USB 2.0 into your DAW of choice or you can use the supplied PMD Mark Editor software on CD to do the same.

What you do get is a chunky handheld solid state recorder that will run at 44.1, 48, and 96kHz and 16 or 24-bit to Broadcast WAV (or MP3) from two XLR inputs (mic/line switchable) with phantom power or from the two built-in condensers. There's also a SPDIF digital input, an additional 1/8-inch stereo line input and phono line outputs.

Of special note is an excellent headphone circuit on 1/4-inch with a thumbwheel volume control and this is placed at the head-end of the PMD with the individual but gangable record level pots and a whole width's worth of LED input/output metering.

Activity centres on a wonderfully clear OLED that shows you timing info or the menu functions. The PMD661 operates in Preset modes with a preset being a user configurable combination of all the variables you have a choice in. Thus you would set up a preset for using external mics at 24/96 PCM or a no-brainer MP3 configuration with Automatic Level control. Fortunately, and it's something I was extremely grateful for when I first encountered that PMD670, Marantz ships its units in configurations that work straight out of the box and so it is with the PMD661. This powers up using the internal mics in stereo (you can run in mono) with manual record level control and a good speech friendly recording rate.

You power up on the flick switch on the right hand side of the unit and you can be in record with the Record button lit solid red in just over 5 seconds. There's a Record Pause and Stop while the track forward/back, Play scrub forward/back keys live west and east on a ring that surrounds the Play/Pause button. North and south raise and lower the varispeed for playback and there's also user-definable skipback; this is a machine that understands it will be used for transcription (hoo-blinking-ray).

The Menu button allows you to access and to

configure the presets, the display format, time/date, access utilities (like setting timer record, save settings and format the card), set the language and check the firmware version.

A nice touch is ready access to your track list on a dedicated button beneath the screen, which among other things allows you to delete, copy and move files. Within Play you can copy a segment, divide a file or add Marks after the event but it's simple useful stuff that you could need when you're miles away from a computer.

Power comes from four AAs and Marantz claims 5 hour's operation. I used rechargeables and there's a DC input for a supplied PSU too.

Things I like about this PMD apart from the size, which is just so right in my hand, is the lack of handling noise and how immediate everything is. Your thumb operates the Record and Record Pause buttons, the metering is slanted for clarity and the record level pots are easy to get at. I could find no sign of a limiter although there must be one as when you do hit the end stops it rarely sounds catastrophic.

I like the logic of this device; it's clear to follow and immediate to 'get' and you're reassured that you're unlikely to press a button and do something that you will later regret. The mic pres are quiet and lively and while this is a very unlikely looking candidate for 24/96 recording it is perfectly within its abilities to deliver stunning results. Of course, I used the built-in mics and they're great and up to all the speech applications that I needed it for. It is a great package.

But there's got to be some downsides. Well, 2 seconds' prerecord is not quite enough for my reaction times. Maybe the SD door cover is a little flimsy but my machine has had a hard life so far and nothing has fallen off it so the design is probably sound. I don't like where the carrying strap fixes to the front because it clutters the head end panel but I can't think of any better place to put it. And that's the best I can do...

What Marantz has done is distilled its ideas down and obviously also listened to users because the PMD661 is one of those rare examples of a device that does less than other machines in its broad price range but is so much better as a result.

That's the true qualification for the professional moniker as we've discussed so many times in these pages before. It's not just about having XLRs; it's more about approach and sensibilities. This is a fabulous machine that I would recommend unreservedly. ■

PROS

Fantastic package of features and performance; rugged; easy to use; the right size, weight and scale; professional.

CONS

Only 2s of prerecord; some might want all those 'other' features.

Contact

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